

1939-1965: Armed resistance to Franco



An account by Antonio Téllez of the underground guerrilla armed struggle of anarchists and anti-fascists against General Franco's regime following the Civil War.

The rattle of the Thompson gun

The guerrilla struggle against Francoism actually arose in the days following the army revolt against the Spanish Republic on 18 July 1936. Across the country, workers launched a revolution and took up arms against the armed forces. In areas which fell immediately to the mutinous army, a bloody repression was promptly set in motion and this obliged many anti-fascists to take to the hills to save their skins. This was repeated over nearly three years of civil war as areas were conquered, one after another, by the Francoist army and it extended to virtually the entirety of the Peninsula after the Republican troops surrendered in the Centre-Levante zone on 31 March 1939.

Very little has been written about the scale of the armed struggle against Franco following the civil war. It was and still is known to few. A thick blanket of silence has been drawn over the fighters, for a variety of reasons. According to Franco's personal friend Civil Guard Lieutenant-General Camilo Alonso Vega - who was in charge of the anti-guerrilla campaign for twelve years - banditry (the term the Francoists always used to describe the guerrilla activity) was of "great significance" in Spain, in that it "disrupted communications, demoralised folk, wrecked our economy, shattered our unity and discredited us in the eyes of the outside world".

Only days before those words were uttered General Franco himself had excused the blanket silence imposed on reports of armed opposition and the efforts mounted to stop it, when he had stated that "the Civil Guard's sacrifices in the years following the Second World War were made selflessly and in silence, because, for political and security reasons it was inappropriate to publicise the locations, the clashes, casualty figures or names of those who fell in performance of their duty, in a heroic and unspoken sacrifice."

This cover-up has continued right up until our own day. In a Spanish Television (TVE) programme entitled *Guerrilla Warfare* and broadcast in 1984, General Manuel Prieto Lopez cynically referred to the anti-Francoist fighters as bandits and killers. Not that this should come as any surprise - during the period described as the political transition to democracy (November 1975 to October 1982) all political forces, high financiers, industrialists, the military and church authorities decided that references to the past were inappropriate and that



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the protracted blood-letting of the Franco era should be consigned to oblivion. That consensus holds firm today*, and historians eager to lift that veil run up against insurmountable obstacles when they try to examine State, Civil Guard or Police archives.

We have no reliable breakdown of the overall figures for guerrillas or for the casualties sustained by or inflicted upon the security forces and Army. If we are to have some grasp of what this unequal struggle against the Dictatorship was like, our only option is to turn to figures made public in 1968 - a one-off it seems - according to which the Civil Guard sustained 628 casualties (258 deaths) between 1943 and 1952: some 5,548 bandits were wiped out in 2,000 skirmishes, many of which amounted to full-scale battles. The figures for this eradication are as follows: killed - 2,166; captured or surrendered - 3,382; arrested as liaisons, accessories or for aiding and abetting - 19,407. An embarrassed silence shrouds the earlier years between 1939 and 1942, when units from the regular army, the Foreign Legion and the Regulars, with artillery support attempted to wipe out the guerrillas. The aforementioned figures given for Civil Guard casualties at the guerrillas' hands can be discounted. If we compare the lists of deceased Civil Guards during these years where no cause of death is listed, with peace-time death-rates, we find a surplus of deaths which are (assuming they were the results of illness or accident) inexplicable and arrive at what is unquestionably a figure closer to the truth: some 1,000 deaths on active service.

The escalation of guerrilla activity began in 1943, when the widespread belief that the Third Reich had victory in its grasp was starting to fade, following the bloody rout of the German Army's elite divisions at Stalingrad. As the tide of the Second World War turned, the anti-Franco guerrillas, as might have been expected, bounced back in terms of morale and dynamism, and from 1944 onwards flourished to a considerable extent. Its heyday was in 1946-1947. After that, partly as a consequence of international policy which sought a rapprochement with Franco, a decline set in that ended with the demise of guerrilla activity in 1952. In Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and other cities, urban guerrilla activity persisted for a decade or so longer.

After 1944, guerrillas operating inside Spain received considerable reinforcements from their exiled countrymen who had played an active part in the liberation of France and the French Resistance. These were well-trained and experienced men equipped with up-to-date weaponry and easy to use high explosive substances such as plastique. Most of them were drawn from France and a smaller number from across the seas in North Africa. Communist leaders charged with politicising guerrilla activity came in from the Americas via Lisbon and Vigo. The Communists who took it for granted that the war-cry of "Taking Spain back!"

would be the signal for a general popular uprising against the Franco regime made a great song and dance about this comparatively massive aid.

Some 3,000 guerrillas organised in France with the very same weaponry they had used in their fight against the Nazis, mounted two main attacks across the Pyrenees in 1944. The first incursion was into Navarre on 3 and 7 October: the second came via Catalonia, the object being to establish a bridge-head in the Vall d'Aran and install a provisional Republican government. It was also taken for granted that, confronted by such a *fait accompli*, the Allies would be prompted to step in to bring down Franco. These incursions were easily repulsed -

having been heralded in advance - for the Spanish government had taken all appropriate measures. Even so, there were lots of guerrillas who refused to return to their bases and opted instead to infiltrate into the interior in small groups. There they reinforced existing guerrilla bands and set up new ones where none existed.

The weapons they brought in were a lot more effective and better suited to

guerrilla fighting.

The most commonplace weapon was the British Sten gun, or the German M.P. 38. Both were

rapid-fire weapons and used 9mm ammunition which was the most plentiful sort. American weapons like the Colt pistol flooded in, as did (in lesser numbers) Thompson sub-machineguns, a heavier but highly effective weapon. One burst of Thompson gunfire in the hills was reminiscent of an artillery salvo. The fighters entering Spain also brought with them a tried and tested morale forged in victories scored against the Nazis and in the staunch belief that Franco could not survive the downfall of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. They also had organisational experience behind them and solid ideological convictions, anarchist, socialist or communist, qualities that would quickly transform the guerrilla phenomenon as they afforded increased cohesiveness to countless scattered guerrilla bands.

The main areas of guerrilla activity were those whose geographical features made defence and survival most likely i.e.: mountain ranges and areas which provided adequate cover. For example in Andalusia there were guerrilla bands aplenty, some of them over 100-strong. In Asturias, the guerrillas displayed tremendous enterprise, not unconnected with a deep-rooted political consciousness: the revolution by the Asturias miners in October 1934 had not been all that long ago. In many areas, guerrilla activity was intermittent and random as guerrilla bands moved around for a number of reasons, such as the encroachments of counter-insurgency forces.

The style and nature of the guerrilla struggle varied with the terrain and the resources of the individuals and groups involved. Activities included the bombing of strategic objectives, *attentats* (political assassinations), the movement of arms, the protection of individuals and groups involved in underground political activity; bank robberies and forgery to fund the struggle and destabilise the economy; as well as some more spectacular actions: rescue missions to free captured comrades, open fire-fights with fascist forces; and even an attempt to bomb Franco from the air! (Three men in a light aircraft came within a hair's breadth of dropping incendiary and fragmentation bombs on the General and his Aides during a Regatta in 1948).

An example that sums up the mentality and spirit of the guerrilla movement of

the time is provided by a small team of Anarchist guerrillas, led by the veteran fighter Francisco Sabate Llopart (El Quico). On their return to Spain after the end of the Second World War one of their first missions was the 'expropriation' of money and valuables in a series of aggravated robberies of local big-businessmen. On completion of 'business', those 'visited' would be left a note like the following one, left at the home of a wealthy big-store owner, Manuel Garriga:

"We are not robbers, we are libertarian resistance fighters. What we have just taken will help in a small way to feed the orphaned and starving children of those anti-fascists who you and your kind have shot. We are people who have never and will never beg for what is ours. So long as we have the strength to do so we shall fight for the freedom of the Spanish working class. As for you, Garriga, although you are a murderer and a thief, we have spared you, because we as libertarians appreciate the value of human life, something which you never have, nor are likely to, understand."

A small example of how, despite the loss of the war, and despite the ruthlessness of the fascist repression, those involved in the resistance still managed to maintain their politics, their humanity, and their self-respect.

The armed opposition to Franco was no longer a serious problem after 1949 and, as we have said, it petered out around 1952. Aside from the severe blows dealt by the Civil Guard and the Army, the absence of a logistical system capable of keeping the fighters equipped, and, above all else, the fact that the opposition political parties had chosen to gamble upon diplomacy as a substitute for weapons, made it impossible for the resistance's offensive activity to continue.

Another highly significant element in the winding-up of the guerrilla struggle was the arrival on the scene in 1947 of superbly trained and schooled security force personnel in the shape of

"counter-guerrilla bands", dressed and armed in the guerrillas' own style and sowing confusion and terror on their home ground. These "counter-gangs" even carried out savage killings that were ascribed to the guerrillas proper, the aim being to bring them into disrepute and strip them of popular support. Then again, the infiltration of police plants into the guerrilla bands was extraordinarily effective and made it possible to dismantle some of the more important groupings.

In Asturias, in 1948, around 30 socialist guerrillas boarded a French fishing smack which had arrived specifically to collect them and deliver them to St Jean de Luz in France. In Levante, the last remaining guerrillas in the area, around two dozen survivors, made it out to France in 1952. In Andalusia, a few bands survived until the end of 1952, but their leaders - like the anarcho-syndicalist, Bernabe Lopez Calle (1889-1949) - had already perished in combat. A few managed to escape to Gibraltar or North Africa, but, for the most part, they were wiped out in armed clashes: others were executed by the garrote vil (death by strangulation) or firing squads: those who escaped that fate served prison terms sometimes in excess of 20

years.

In 1953, the United States signed a military and economic assistance treaty with Franco. Two years later, Franco's Spain was welcomed into the United Nations. However, even though all was lost, a few die-hards refused to give up the fight: in Cantabria, the last two guerrillas, Juan Fernandez Ayala (Juanin) and Franciscxo Bedoya Gutierrez (El Bedoya) met their deaths in April and in December of 1957 respectively. In Catalonia, Ramon Vila Capdevila (Caraquemada), the last anarchist guerrilla, was gunned down by the Civil Guard in August 1963. But the honour of being the last guerrilla has to go to Jose Castro Veiga (El Piloto) who died, without ever having laid down his arms, in the province of Lugo (Galicia), March 1965.

There are a number of reasons for the failure of the Guerrilla campaign against Franco, and although open guerrilla warfare had all but ended in the 50's, the movement against Franco continued, as did underground political activity, until the regime's eventual collapse. What the guerrillas had wanted to achieve was open insurrection against Franco. What they show us today, through their ambition and their sacrifice, is that the brutal repression of the progressive working class after the Civil War did not go unchallenged. The full story of the guerrilla struggle, as Tellez states in this article, is still being uncovered. All we can do today is salute the men and women of the resistance who gave their lives, not only in the defence of their class, but for a future where the social structures that create the Francos, are buried along with them.

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* Article originally written by Antonio Téllez in 1996